

The Republic of Pemberley: Politeness and Citizenship in Digital Sociability

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Early theorists of online networks likened the emerging terrain of cyberspace to the democratic underpinnings of Jürgen Habermas's conception of the bourgeois public sphere.¹ Habermas's influential account describes the emergence of a discursive realm of public opinion in late-seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century Britain, and its subsumption by 1830 within the consumer marketplace.² The rational-critical community constitutive of the public sphere was enabled by the emergence of new forms of print culture including the periodical, newspaper and sentimental novel.³ Characterised by openness and transparency, rather than the exclusivity of court culture, the bourgeois public sphere was potentially inclusive of all citizens.⁴ Echoing Habermas's own emphasis, the eighteenth-century public sphere has been traditionally equated with the English coffeehouses and clubs of the first decades of the century. Rejecting Hobbes's characterisation of individuals as inherently self-interested, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French scholars proclaimed a doctrine of innate sociability, augmenting their argument from natural law with a teleological account of polite sociability as a historical attainment.⁵ English coffeehouses served as the material instantiation of such Enlightenment ideals, offering a sociable space in which educated men gathered to exchange ideas, read and disseminate pamphlets, and attend lectures, political debates and scientific demonstrations.

Reflecting the enduring cultural resonance of such Habermasian principles, contemporary cyber-communities have employed new technologies of sociability to suspend traditional social hierarchies and establish more inclusive publics by bringing together individuals to engage with issues of common interest.⁶ Observing the democratising impulses of both eighteenth- and twentieth-century technologies of sociability, David Berry has characterised the Enlightenment coffeehouse as 'an early form of Internet, where all sorts of information was widely (if sometimes illegally) available.'⁷ In the wake of the exponential expansion of the World Wide Web throughout the 1990s, Brian A. Connery similarly observed the correspondence between the eighteenth-century public sphere and nascent forms of online sociability, describing in 1997 the way in which 'CyberMonk,' a San Franciscan squatter, used the internet facilities provided by a local café to gain access to a

virtual living room, telephone and mailbox – the spaces of public accessibility and private retreat that act as conditions of contemporary social belonging. CyberMonk thus emulated the men of limited means who employed eighteenth-century coffeehouses as stages upon which to cut a ‘good figure,’ establishing themselves in sociable spaces that belied their often humble domestic situations.⁸ Members of online communities do not share the spatial and corporeal proximity enabled by the eighteenth-century coffeehouse, within which individuals’ enactment of citizenship was performatively instantiated and embodied. Like their Enlightenment counterparts, however, the group identities of online communities are constituted by a common engagement with and production of a range of circulating texts, through which discursive communities are instantiated.

Writing in 1997, Mark Poster emphasised the egalitarian possibilities of multi-user online domains, their online environments purged of the diacritical markers of the embodied world:

Even in cyberspace, asymmetries emerge which could be termed ‘political inequalities.’ Yet the salient characteristic of Internet community is the diminution of prevailing hierarchies of race, class and especially gender. What appears in the embodied world as irreducible hierarchy plays a lesser role in the cyberspace of MOOs [a form of multi-user domain]. And, as a result, the relation of cyberspace to material human geographies is decidedly one of rupture and challenge.⁹

Poster’s account of the diminution of social hierarchies in cyberspace recalls the rhetoric of the suspension of class stratification within the eighteenth-century public sphere. This association is further evoked by the online Jane Austen community, *The Republic of Pemberley*, which elaborates its extravagant appreciation of Austen’s works within the Habermasian rhetoric of eighteenth-century Bluestocking feminism.¹⁰ In its avowal of the primacy of female hospitality and textual output, *The Republic of Pemberley* recalls the feminisation of the eighteenth-century public sphere through the ‘efflorescence in women’s writing and cultural production’ that characterised the 1760s and 1770s.¹¹ Affirming its female governance as a sign of distinction, *The Republic of Pemberley* further echoes the celebration throughout the 1770s of Bluestocking scholarship and sociability as signs of British national pre-eminence.¹² *The Republic* is explicitly modelled on the protocols of late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century sociability, delimiting the range of acceptably spirited

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online exchanges as falling between the teasing vivacity of Elizabeth Bennet and the social transgressions of Emma Woodhouse at Box Hill.¹³ *The Republic of Pemberley* and the eighteenth-century public sphere are moreover linked by an analogous tension between their universalising ideals and their actual social instantiation, each employing rigorous social regulation to quell the embodied and affective energies constitutive of their alterative polities. The ensuing discussion reveals the extent to which the theoretically democratic spaces of the eighteenth-century Bluestocking salon were constituted by strict notions of class and sexual propriety, with such dictates working to mask the extent to which Bluestocking sociability and scholarship transgressed the gendered and sexual norms of late-eighteenth-century Britain. It further elucidates the shifting landscape of Austen's contemporary cultural figuration, suggesting that the democratising energies of *Pemberley*'s popular origins and online environment are limited by the critical figuration of Austen's works as heteronormative social comedies, thereby denying the embodied and affective energies that animate both Austen's texts and their popular critical reception.

I

Historians have long questioned the putative inclusivity of the eighteenth-century public sphere, observing the extent to which the gendered division of the public and private realms excluded women from participating in periodical print culture and coffeehouse sociability.¹⁴ Joan B. Landes notes that the distinction separating the public sphere from the market and family deemed a broad range of topics associated with female discourse as 'private' and thus ineligible for discussion within the rational-critical sphere.¹⁵ In Landes's influential formulation, the eighteenth-century public sphere was therefore 'essentially, not just contingently, masculinist.'¹⁶ As Deborah Heller has argued, however, the Bluestocking salons convened between 1750 and 1780 demonstrate the central role of select women within the field of 'intellectual sociability' more traditionally gendered as masculine. The term 'Bluestocking' describes the female-centred social and intellectual circles that formed in Britain around genteel hostesses including Elizabeth Vesey, Frances

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Boscawen and Elizabeth Montagu, the ‘Queen of the Blues,’¹⁷ English Bluestocking networks drew upon the ideals instantiated within the salons of the French Enlightenment, hosted in the first decades of the eighteenth century by Parisian *salonnières* such as Claudine-Alexandrine Guérin de Tencin and Marie-Thérèse Geoffrin.¹⁸ Having established a spa friendship at Tunbridge Wells in the 1750s, Vesey and Montagu convened summertime salons structured around rational conversation, before presiding over winter gatherings in their respective London residences of Hill Street and Bolton Row.¹⁹ Bluestocking salons were also established in Dublin and Bath, in which distinguished guests – including classical scholar and translator Elizabeth Carter, essayist and correspondent Catherine Talbot, politician and author Lord Lyttelton, evangelical author Hannah More, Frances Boscawen, Horace Walpole, and David Garrick – joined select professionals to engage in the civilising influences of intellectual discourse, polite sociability, patronage and philanthropy.²⁰ Montagu’s sister Sarah Scott, also participated in the provincial Bluestocking networks of Bath and Batheaston, joining her close friend Lady Barbara Montagu, Elizabeth Cutts, and her brother’s illegitimate daughter, Miss M. Arnold, in educating the children of the local poor as did the retired gentry women described in her 1762 novel, *A Description of Millenium Hall*.²¹ In response to the excesses of contemporary fashion, Bluestocking gatherings set aside the modish pastimes of gambling, card-playing and courtly wit, instead emphasising elegant conversation and reciprocal intellectual exchange on topics of cultural substance.²² Montagu’s 1765 account of the ‘bluestocking doctrine’ of ‘rational conversation’ recalled the language and sentiments of Milton’s concept of ‘rational delight,’²³ in which relations between the sexes are secured by the reciprocal exchange manifest in ‘meet and happy conversation.’²⁴ English Bluestockings echoed the French *salonnières* in emphasising the complementarity of the sexes, the civilising role of hostesses such as Montagu and Vesey recalling the figuration of female sociability as a transformative cultural force. In her 1786 poem, *The Bas Bleu: Or Conversation*, evangelical Bluestocking Hannah More thus described such salons as civilised gatherings in which men were ‘not bound by pedant rules / Nor Ladies *Precieuses ridicules*.’ More’s poem celebrated in particular the fusion of reason and virtue within Bluestocking sociability, declaring ‘CONVERSATION,

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wisdom's friend, as the object, and the end / Of moral truth, man's proper science, with sense and learning in alliance.²⁵ Like their Gallic precursors, English Bluestocking salons were exclusive affairs, their invitees drawn from the ranks of the gentry, professional and upper middle-classes. The theoretically universal claims of human reason nonetheless led hostesses to select guests according to their ability to participate in lively and rational debate, rather than their rank or wealth, establishing discursive reason as the basis of a limited form of meritocracy.²⁶

The putative inclusivity of the Habermasian public sphere is reflected in the etymology of the term 'Bluestocking'. First employed in the seventeenth century to describe the sober dress of the members of Cromwell's Little Parliament,²⁷ its eighteenth-century usage was held to derive from Vesey's 1756 assurance that naturalist Benjamin Stillingfleet was welcome at her salon in inexpensive blue worsted stockings, rather than the white silk customary for evening wear.²⁸ Bluestocking networks were thereby distinguished from the court system and its associated patronage networks, advocating informality and a limited form of meritocracy through which upper- and middle-class professionals could advance socially and materially.²⁹ Bluestockings such as Montagu nonetheless distanced themselves from both the supposed "superstition," fecklessness, and improvidence of the labouring classes and the consumer culture of the emerging middling ranks, reasserting their discursively-marked class identity as fashionable consumption threatened to obfuscate social distinctions.³⁰ The emergence of Bluestocking feminism thus reflected the convergence of class and gender interests as women of the gentry and upper middle classes participated in the challenge to inherited privilege by an emerging meritocracy. Bluestocking hostesses were further identified as guardians of social welfare, their philanthropic activities softening the impact of gentry capitalism on the working classes while simultaneously asserting the class disparities that distinguished genteel benefactresses such as Montagu and More from the objects of their largesse.³¹

The class-constrained limits of Montagu's philanthropy are revealed by her unhappy history of literary patronage. Following the death of her husband in 1775, Elizabeth Montagu inherited his fortune and actively managed the estate's northern collieries and associated business interests. In 1785, Montagu joined with Hannah

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More in promoting ‘the Bristol Milkwoman,’ Ann Yearsley, whose acclaimed *Poems, on Several Occasions* generated £600 through its 1785 subscription publication. More declared of Yearsley’s verse in a letter to Montagu, ‘the poem appears to me to have the tone of good Company, and a gentility that is wonderful in a milker of Cows, and a feeder of Hogs’.³² The tension between More’s charitable works and insistence on the maintenance of social hierarchy – revealed by her description of a Cheddar Poor Women’s Club, in which ‘we give them all a little tract and carry them to Church’³³ – nonetheless led her to declare of Yearsley’s rising fame, ‘I am utterly against taking her out of her station.’³⁴ Investing Yearsley’s royalties lest she or her husband squander them, the poet’s patrons were horrified when she requested control of her income. Montagu declared in a letter to More:

The degree of indignation I felt on reading the extract from the Milk Womans [sic] letter I could not express if I would, nor would if I could; for wrath is an ugly, fierce, hard favoured thing, & had better hide its face than expose it. I will confess that for some minutes it curdled the milk of human kindness in my heart.³⁵

Montagu describes her anger towards Yearsley as unspeakable and unbecoming, its obdurate ferocity transmuting the virtuous products of both Montagu’s sympathy and Yearsley’s rustic labour. As Montagu continues, describing the writer More had recently labelled a genius: ‘An honest good woman, who makes the very worst skim milk cheese, is a more respectable Creature than ye vain, proud, ungratefull Lactilla, who makes pretty verses.’³⁶ More endorsed Montagu’s opinion, writing to Eva Garrick, the wife of More’s own literary patron, in November 1785:

I told [Montagu] six Weeks ago, we should be immediately delivered from all connexion with that wretched Milkwoman, and yet with all my zeal and industry, I have not been able to accomplish it, to my regret, for after all the trouble I have had, I wou’d not get rid of her but in an honourable and conscientious manner, which I now hope to do.³⁷

More’s ‘honour’ led her to reluctantly wind up the trust opened in Yearsley name and allow the poet to access her profits. While two further editions of Yearsley’s collection were published under More’s auspices, a third volume was released by a rival press in 1786, including an ‘Autobiographical narrative’ rejecting More and Montagu’s account of their dispute.³⁸ Class differences similarly soured Montagu’s

patronage of James Woodhouse, ‘the shoemaker poet’ (1735-1820), who produced little poetry while serving as Montagu’s house steward for nearly twenty years, ‘growing grey in servitude, and poorer under patronage.’³⁹ Charles Pigott’s 1794 anti-Whig satire *The Female Jockey Club* accordingly described the Bluestockings as seeking to establish ‘an Aristocracy in the republic of letters,’ satirising their fusion of literary and class identity in observing, ‘Vanity, or rather a consciousness of the *just* deference due to their *rank* and *fortune*, encouraged them to hope that they should soon be able to pluck from plebeian brows the laurels and the bays.’⁴⁰ Singling Montagu out for particular censure, Pigott criticised the paltry and notably public nature of her philanthropic activities, declaring, ‘Let us hear no more then, of Mrs. Montagues’s [*sic*] public chimney sweeper *festival*’ – an event held each May Day in the forecourt of her London residence – ‘a subtraction of five pounds, from an income of 8000*l.* a year.’⁴¹ The meritorious and philanthropic bases of Bluestocking ideology were thus figured as self-aggrandising displays, with Montagu’s spectacular provision of a day’s plenty only causing ‘famine [to] be more cruelly felt the next.’⁴²

Bluestockings such as Montagu, Carter and historian Catharine Macaulay rose to public prominence in the 1760s and 1770s within the context of the outpouring of female literary and cultural production that Paul Langford has described as ‘a full blown revolution for women.’⁴³ In June 1776, the *Westminster Magazine* published an article entitled ‘Observations on Female Literature in General, including some Particulars Relating to Mrs. Montagu and Mrs. Barbauld’, opening with a poetic comparison between the enslavement of women in eastern seraglios and the intellectual and artistic liberty of ‘British Nymphs.’⁴⁴ As Harriet Guest has argued, the celebration of learned ladies in this period constituted an important element of a feminised discourse of polite nationalism. Montagu observed that ‘female worthies’⁴⁵ were lauded as signs of British progress and superiority, writing to Carter in 1777, ‘Unless we could be all put into a popular ballad, set to a favourite old English tune, I do not see how we could become more universally celebrated.’⁴⁶ The 1770s also witnessed the rise of a second generation of Bluestockings including Montagu’s protégés Hannah More and Fanny Burney, as well as Hester Chapone, Anna Seward and Anna Laetitia Barbauld. The first

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generation Bluestockings maintained strict notions of feminine sexual behaviour, their stringent advocacy of social and sexual continence reflecting the extent to which their participation in the literary public sphere rendered them potential targets of gendered social opprobrium.⁴⁷ They were accordingly unforgiving in their judgment of the widowed Hester Thrale's 1784 marriage to Gabriel Piozzi, an Italian Catholic who had formerly served as music master to Thrale's daughter, Queeney.

As Montagu wrote to Vesey in July 1784:

Mrs Thrale's marriage has taken such horrible possession of my mind I cannot advert to any other subject. I am sorry and feel the worst kind of sorrow that which is blended with shame. Sorrow lies in state on the tomb of the Dead, in the region of melancholy, it preserves a certain dignity & fears not to meet ye eye which casts a look of pity on it, but when one laments or weeps over the disgrace of a Friend better are ye sensations & as ye causes of ones grief is an object of contempt and scorn one cannot disturb then the heart by communicating its sufferings but shuts it up with all its poisonous and baleful qualities.⁴⁸

Montagu ascribes to Thrale a dishonourable lack of sexual continence, distinguishing between the dignified and properly public solemnity elicited by the fall of an equal and the contaminating and privatised shame of witnessing that of 'an object of contempt and scorn.' Describing herself as fixated upon Thrale's situation, she employs the rhetorical trope of paralepsis to convey her 'uncommunicable' suffering, setting in circulation the malignant associations she traces to her ostensibly unspoken pain. Declaring Thrale to have previously been an exemplary wife and mother, Montagu suggests that insanity serves as the only possible excuse for her subsequent behaviour: 'I w[oul]d give much to make every one think of her as mad, the best & wisest can be liable to lunacy. If she is not considered in that light she must throw a disgrace on her Sex.'⁴⁹

Montagu's denunciation of Thrale suggests that the Bluestockings' participation in the eighteenth-century rational-critical community was rendered possible by their stringent public maintenance of the proper boundaries of social and sexual propriety, such adherences authorising the Blue's activities even as they compromised the universalising claims of the Habermasian public sphere. Such image management was further necessitated, Susan S. Lanser suggests, by the affectively intense relationships shared by Bluestockings including Montagu and Carter, and Sarah Scott and Lady Barbara Montagu.⁵⁰ In a letter of 1759, Montagu

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characterises her desire for Carter to that of an infant weaned precipitately from the maternal breast. Montagu initially likens Carter to the ‘soft nectar’ imbibed by infants, identifying her presence as nourishing and maternal, as well as physically requisite to thriving. Montagu’s image then shifts to characterise Carter as the breast itself – ‘we older children who have stronger passions & more discerning palates must not indulge complaints but be placid in disappointment, & when our nectar’d bowl is taken from us’ – deepening the inherent eroticism of the image by emphasising the corporeal pleasure as well as biological imperative of Carter’s attentiveness.⁵¹ She continues, ‘I felt such an impatience for a letter yesterday that if it had not arrived I really should have whimpered.’ As Jane Macgrath observes, ‘This letter exhibits a tangible, almost unbearably physical desire’, the intensity of Montagu’s yearning underscored by the requirement that she repress her covetousness.⁵² Montagu’s sister, Sarah Scott, was similarly devoted to her intimate companion, Lady Barbara ‘Bab’ Montagu. Following legal separation from her husband in 1752, Scott established a home with Lady Bab, with whom she lived until the latter’s death in 1765; letters between Elizabeth Montagu and Scott figure Montagu’s husband and Lady Bab as commensurate domestic partners.⁵³ Such same-sex affective investments, however, did not prevent the Bluestockings from insisting upon their commitment to the maintenance of the heteronormative social order. In a letter of 1750, Montagu wrote to Scott, perhaps, Gary Kelly suggests, warning her against drawing undue attention to her intimacy with Lady Bab: ‘I cannot think what Mrs L– & Miss R [or K?] mean by making such a parade of their affection, they might know it w[oul]d give occasion to Lies.’ Montagu continues,

[T]hose sort of reports hurt us all [a]nd fall in their degree on the whole Sex. And really if this nonsense gains ground one must shut oneself up alone; for one cannot have Men Intimates & at this rate the Women are more scandalous. So we must become Savages and have no friendships or connexions.⁵⁴

As Lanser observes, Montagu is here most concerned with the public face of such homosocial intimacies, her advice to Scott suggesting the extent to which the Bluestockings’s prominence was enabled by their public commitment to the heteronormative gender norms they simultaneously resisted.⁵⁵ Indeed, the retired gentry women of Scott’s *Millenium Hall* declare, ‘We consider matrimony as

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absolutely necessary to the good of society' – even as they demur from entering the unions they encourage amongst the working poor – 'we [...] substitute many others, and certainly much more promote wedlock than we could do by entering into it ourselves.'⁵⁶ The tension between the theoretical openness and actual constraints of Bluestocking sociability might thus be seen to be mirrored by the tension between the public propriety and private particularity of Bluestocking intimacies, through which the Blues authorised their participation in the Habermasian public through the exclusion of bodily and affective particularity.⁵⁷

II

The doctrinaire tone of such Bluestocking epistles initially appears to diverge from the virtual community constituted by *The Republic of Pemberley*. The constitution of the *Republic* is nonetheless similarly ambivalent, its democratising celebration of Austen's pop-cultural presence set against its exclusionary framing and insistence upon the heteronormativity of Austen's oeuvre. *The Republic of Pemberley* was initially founded as a bulletin board devoted to the phenomenally popular 1995 BBC/A&E *Pride and Prejudice*, adapted by Andrew Davies, directed by Simon Langton and starring Jennifer Ehle and Colin Firth. Having grown out of the email discussion list *Austen-L* in July 1996, *The Republic of Pemberley* registered the domain name <pemberley.com> in May 1997 and moved to a dedicated server in July 1998, from where it continues to constitute an active web community, its international membership primarily comprised of American women. Watched by over ten million U.K. viewers in September 1995, the Langton/Davies *Pride and Prejudice* was central to the 'Austenmania' of the mid-1990s.⁵⁸ Featuring a voluptuously radiant Elizabeth and a smouldering Darcy in tight-fitting breeches, Davies' adaptation brought to light the sexual tension between this sparring pair by foregrounding the erotised bodies beneath their 'posh tight restricting clothes,' a frisson augmented by the pair's off-screen relationship during filming.⁵⁹ Inverting Laura Mulvey's account of the camera's male gaze, the production rendered Colin Firth's Darcy a cinematic object, lingering on him loosening his cravat, naked in the bathtub, and 'wet and tousled' in the famous pond-diving scene.⁶⁰ Lyme Park, the

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National Trust property featured as Pemberley, was subsequently thronged with paying visitors, anxious to see not only ‘Austen’s’ interiors but also Davies’ famous pond.⁶¹ The success of this production constituted a virtual community of viewers joined by mutually hyperbolic affective experiences. Emblematic of these were the public ecstasies experienced over Darcy’s wet shirt, this simultaneously guilty and compulsory pleasure evoked within Helen Fielding’s 1996 Austen paratext *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (adapted by Davies for the screen), in which the fictional Bridget repeatedly asks Colin Firth to detail his experience of shooting the fabled scene.⁶² 1995 also saw the release of Ang Lee’s *Sense and Sensibility*, awarded an Oscar for Emma Thompson’s screenplay; and Amy Heckerling’s teen adaptation *Clueless*, which transported Emma Woodhouse from Highbury to twentieth-century southern California. Two further adaptations of *Emma* were released in 1996, a Miramax film starring Gwyneth Paltrow, and an A&E/ITV telefilm starring Kate Beckinsale.⁶³ Such was Austen’s pop-cultural ubiquity in this period that the American magazine *Entertainment Weekly* featured a photo of a mob-capped Austen reclining poolside, juggling a script of *Pride and Prejudice*, Hollywood trade papers, oversized sunglasses, laptop and mobile telephone.⁶⁴ It was thus fitting that Emma Thompson accepted her 1996 Golden Globe for *Sense and Sensibility* in the epistolary guise of Austen herself, her account (to Cassandra?) of the evening’s cramped ‘carriages’ and ‘middling’ gowns underscoring the unexpected convergence of early-nineteenth- and late-twentieth-century sociability.⁶⁵

Acknowledging its origins in Austen’s *fin de siècle* fashionableness, *The Republic of Pemberley* takes its name from Darcy’s estate in *Pride and Prejudice*, the quintessential gentleman’s estate that stands as a metonym for its similarly ideal owner. The site’s designation as a ‘Republic’ recalls the figuration of the Habermasian republic of letters, as it does the historical lineage between the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere and the movement towards representative democracy constituted by the Revolution of 1688. *The Republic of Pemberley* underscores the Habermasian connotations of its designation in referring to members of its community as ‘Citizens of Pemberley’ or ‘Pemberleans,’ their affection for Austen authorising their participation as did the discursive reason of the Bluestocking salon.⁶⁶ The *Republic*’s framing as a virtual nation-state is further

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emphasised by its spatial conception, with outlying site links framed by the textual reassurance, ‘No, you’ve not lost your way. You remain safe within the borders of the Republic of Pemberley.’⁶⁷ Recalling the democratising energies of the eighteenth-century public sphere, the website challenges the cultural hierarchy that has valorised literary texts over their popular iterations, denoting 1990s adaptations of the novels by abbreviations such as ‘P&P0’ and ‘P&P2.’ Its popular orientation is also indicated by its guide to the use of abbreviations such as ‘JE’, translated with strikingly levelling spirit as ‘Jennifer Ehle or Jane Eyre, depending on the context’, the juxtaposition of actor and fictive identity recalling the Janeite practice of figuring characters as real people. Responding to the anticipated question, ‘Don’t you all like the film and TV adaptations too much?’ the webmistress offers the prompt rejoinder, ‘Too much for what?’ As she attests, ‘we still honor our gushing roots, and the Austen-for-the-masses feel that a demonstrative love for the adaptations brings to the site.’⁶⁸ *Pemberley* similarly sanctions the form of textual investments disavowed by the contemporary academy, discussing Austen’s characters as real people and dwelling on forms of atemporal detail that are marginalised by the contemporary prioritisation of narrative in the study of the novel.⁶⁹

The evangelical zeal here expressed is nonetheless manifested highly selectively, the site’s class constraints working as did the Bluestockings’s social proprieties to contain the affective intensities of their alternative polity. In contrast to contemporary scholarly practice, *The Republic of Pemberley* operates as a space where ‘enjoyment rather than hermeneutic mastery is assumed to be the reward of reading, where reading is sociable rather than solitary, and where the stuff of erudition itself seems so different.’⁷⁰ The site’s Frequently Asked Questions declare that ‘All kinds’ of people are welcome to post on Pemberley’s various forums and lists, which include discussion boards devoted to each of Austen’s six major novels, boards focused on the juvenilia and unfinished works dubbed ‘Austenuations’, screen adaptations, and a mock advice column presided over by the persona of *Pride and Prejudice*’s Lady Catherine de Bough (the antithesis of critical custom, Lady Catherine’s virtual salon is one in which ‘Any fictional character may ask for advice. This may include long-dead historical characters.’⁷¹) The precise nature of

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the ‘all kinds’ of people welcomed to the site is nonetheless immediately qualified: ‘Though *some* people, who take pleasure from generalising, say we all speak French, play the piano and own a cat.’⁷² The site’s body politic is thus explicitly defined by the possession of intellectual and social capital akin to the genteel accomplishments requisite of a Regency gentlewoman, its identity further buttressed by an implicitly feminised model of animal companionship. In response to the query, ‘Why is this place so clubby?’ the webmistress echoes Lady Catherine’s hauteur in the unabashed acknowledgement, ‘We do tend to be a little cliquey, don’t we?’ She continues by defining the site as existing only for Austen devotees, rather than those with a merely passing interest in Austen’s works or cultural milieu. It is still less welcoming of those reductive enough to be contemplating Austen solely from a scholarly perspective, whether as ostensibly objective professional academics or students breaching the site’s sternly worded ‘Homework Policy’.⁷³ *Pemberley* thus exemplifies the form of proprietary Austen fandom evoked within Karen Joy Fowler’s 2004 novel *The Jane Austen Book Club*, in which the science-fiction fan Grigg, the only male member of the eponymous reading group, betrays his unfamiliarity with Austen by arriving to the book club with an omnibus edition of her works. As the narrator observes, ‘We really could not approve of someone who showed up with an obviously new book, of someone who had the complete novels on his lap when only *Emma* was under discussion.’⁷⁴ New members of *The Republic of Pemberley*, while welcomed guardedly, are similarly instructed to ‘hereby apply for membership of our fair republic,’ the implication being that one might, like Yearsley, find one’s application denied.

Within the mixed-sex space of the Bluestocking salon, disparate individuals were brought together through the harmonising role of the genteel female hostess, whose softening and domestication of social differences enabled the open exchanges characteristic of the bourgeois public sphere. Such hostesses, however, also prescribed the boundaries of acceptable sociability, ensuring that the boundaries of the public sphere were augmented, rather than erased. Recalling Montagu’s unabashed stage-managing of her Bluestocking salons, *The Republic of Pemberley*’s female-governance nature is openly avowed, its almost exclusively female demographic echoing that of many undergraduate Austen classrooms. Its legislators

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are not burdened, however, by pedagogical concerns about this fact, declaring that the most valued male citizens are those ‘who can have fun with the novelty of an imaginary women’s nation, and have no urge to dim our collective light or to improve us.’⁷⁵ Pemberley is elsewhere described as a ‘micronation’, this descriptor acknowledging the community’s diminutive size, but also recalling the concept of micro-credit, in which underprivileged businesspeople, frequently women, who lack traditional collateral, are given small loans with which to establish economic independence.⁷⁶ Offering a digital re-conceptualisation of Plato’s speech/writing distinction, Sherry Turkle characterises online textuality as a hybrid semiotic form in which written language takes on the provisionality and discursive qualities of the spoken word. As she observes, ‘what I produce “looks like” the words for a written text, yet it somehow lacks the commitment of composed text.’⁷⁷ Turkle describes the way in which cyberspace, with its facilitation of multiple, variant and potentially simultaneous selves, offers a fitting embodiment of post-humanist conceptions of subjectivity, within which identities are self-consciously sustained and performed, rather than straightforwardly expressed. Turkle further describes cyberspace’s capacity to denaturalise the ontological primacy of ‘real-life’ gender identity, arguing that the necessity of performing one’s (arbitrarily chosen) gender online at once dramatises our attachment to such conventional forms and demonstrates their essential performativity.⁷⁸ In spite of its online medium and distinctive idiom, *The Republic of Pemberley* remains explicitly committed to the maintenance of ‘real life’ identities and *politesse*. Within the confines of Lady Catherine and Co.’s Message Board, Pemberleans are encouraged to both ask and offer etiquette advice in the personae of Austen’s characters, such readerly identification and erasure of the distinction between real and fictive realms recalling the parallel literary universe of Jasper Fforde’s *The Eyre Affair* (2001).⁷⁹ Elsewhere, however, *The Republic* enjoins its users to use their own names and introduce themselves on a central roll of citizenry. As its introduction avers, ‘We know, we know. That’s odd for the net, but we find we’re not like the rest of the net in many respects. We find it keeps things friendly, civil and accountable when people can’t hide behind aliases.’⁸⁰ The performatively constituted selves instantiated through online sociability are thereby dismissed as masks adopted solely to obscure an individual’s ‘true’ identity, a form

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of deception linked to the online exploitation held to characterise sites lacking Pemberley's 'almost perfectly safe rating' for family-friendliness. True graciousness, here grounded in the ontology of 'real life', is thus gendered female, the virtual space of Pemberley, like that of the Bluestocking salon, policed by the same citizens who embody its ostensible inclusivity. While evoking both the universalising rhetoric of the Habermasian public sphere and the performative identitarian possibilities of cyberspace, *The Republic of Pemberley* nonetheless asserts the identity of real and virtual sociability, thereby reinstating the same social striations such formations promise to suspend.

Structured around conversation, rather than card playing, Bluestocking salons were constituted in explicit contrast to the diversions and dissipations of fashionable sociability. Similarly, the *Republic of Pemberley* is not only figured as an imagined nation in the sense of Benedict Anderson, but a technological haven that shields its members from a world from which they are estranged: 'Your haven in a world programmed to misunderstand an obsession with things Austen.' The identification of Austen and exclusivity is not a new phenomenon. Writing in 1859, G. H. Lewes praised Austen, a writer yet to be popularised by wide publication, as appealing only 'to the small circle of cultivated minds.'⁸¹ Describing the effusive male Janeites of the early-twentieth century, whose hyperbolic investment in 'their divine Jane'⁸² is echoed by members of *The Republic of Pemberley*, Brian Southam similarly notes their 'claim to exclusivity and superiority – the Janeites grouped within the pale, the rest of the world standing ignorantly and obtusely without.'⁸³ Such figurations echo the cultural commonplace, only recently critiqued within the academy, that Austen's novels stand in an 'almost extra-territorial'⁸⁴ relationship to the turbulent period of their genesis.⁸⁵ The putatively limited scope of Austen's novels has long been held to be restorative in nature. In July 1819, Lady Eleanor Butler, the elder of the famed 'Ladies of Llangollen', received a request from an ailing friend to borrow 'Emma & any other light reading', such literary tonic figured as integral elements of her convalescence.⁸⁶ Christopher Kent notes that Austen's novels were similarly recommended to British veterans suffering shell-shock in the aftermath of the First World War,⁸⁷ reiterating the belief that her works 'provided a refuge for the sensitive when the contemporary world grew too much for them.'⁸⁸

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While celebrating Austen's status as a social panacea, the legislators of *Pemberley* do not invoke the benignly domestic Austen set in circulation by James Austen-Leigh's 1870 memoir of his 'dear Aunt Jane', but a simultaneously civilised and astringent social arbiter.⁸⁹ Identifying the site's sociable strictures with those of Austen herself, its guardians assert:

[B]y subtle, yet consciously undertaken means, we exude a bit of an attitude, which could be characterized as polite with a bite. We miraculously manage, even within this odd framework, to remain one of the most civil places on the internet, a distinction we prize, but one which is cultivated through an emulation of Jane Austen's own honest, moral and forthright ways, as opposed to sprinkling artificial sweeteners on our words. This attitude weeds out some people, and that's what we intend.

The Austen evoked here is less the subversively detached critic described by D. W. Harding than the feminine ironist influentially celebrated by F. R. Leavis, her 'chaste transmutation' of the masculine satire of Pope and Swift bringing forth a bracingly commonsense moral clarity.⁹⁰ Declaring Austen to have exerted a decisive influence upon George Eliot, Leavis suggests that both writers 'admired truthfulness and chastity and industry and self-restraint, [they] disapproved of loose living and recklessness and deceit and self-indulgence.'⁹¹ Claiming that the Janeite Lord David Cecil depicts Austen as 'an ideal contemporary of Lytton Strachey', Leavis slurs the upper-class Janeites as both socially and sexually suspect, in so doing affirming the wholesome normativity of both Austen and her proper reading public.⁹² Echoing this identification of Austen with stringent adherence to bourgeois virtues, *Pemberley*'s citizens are enjoined to remain within the sociable limits demarcated by Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse, the former whose forthrightness and physicality threaten to render her a monitory example, and the latter whose rudeness to Miss Bates is described by her future husband as derogating the genteel graciousness befitting her superior social position.⁹³ The ideal Pemberlean is thus the morally chastened figure Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick terms 'a Girl Being Taught a Lesson', who is disabused of her initial foibles and raised to heteronormative womanhood through the imitation of Austen's textual examples.⁹⁴ Such is the importance of decorum that *Pemberley*'s residents are not seen to exhibit the high-handedness characterising Montagu's dismissal of Yearsley. Importantly, however, potential

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citizens failing to resonate with the site's evocatively characterised tone are not admitted upon even the reduced social terms extended to Austen's Miss Bates, being instead instructed: 'If you don't, just don't come; it's not your sort of place.'⁹⁵

Such dismissive candour, more evocative of Miss Bingley than Anne Eliot, might be seen to sit in tension with the site's playful characterisation of *Pemberley*'s citizens as politely accomplished cat owners. From a different perspective, however, such arch self-descriptions, like the site's indulgence of the atemporal pleasures of narrative minutiae, instead suggest a feminine appropriation of the distinctively queer impulses of 1930s Janeitism, a male homosocial milieu described by Claudia L. Johnson as that of 'an insider's society of scholar-gentlemen at play'.⁹⁶ *The Republic of Pemberley* flirts with the self-conscious affectation of the camp aesthetic, its members' asserted estrangement from the non-Janeite world knowingly staging their concomitant formation of an elite alternate polity. Its luxuriation in narrative detail similarly resists the teleological impulse that underpins much recent Austen criticism,⁹⁷ this seeming refusal of the identification of Austen's novels with their marriage-endings anticipating the queer turn in Austen studies exemplified by the work of Johnson, Sedgwick, D.A. Miller and Clara Tuite.⁹⁸ Rejecting the queer resonances of its camp tone, however, *The Republic* is nonetheless characterised by emphatic heteronormativity, its commitment to Austen's marriage-endings asserted in contrast to its matriarchal structure and celebration of the kind of non-teleological narrative details that 'render Austen's novels one loose, baggy middle'.⁹⁹ Just as the Bluestocking's fusion of class and gender interests counteracted against the putative social levelling of the eighteenth-century public sphere, Austen's 'honest, moral and forthright ways' are held by *The Republic of Pemberley* to counteract the queerly-valenced 'artificial sweeteners' of both aesthetic decadence and virtual sociability. While affirming the progressive possibilities of its female governance, *The Republic of Pemberley* underscores its heteronormative model of identification and desire, the question 'What is "The Look"?' advising the reader to steady herself before she is linked to an image of Colin Firth in his community-constituting role of Darcy. This tension between progressive possibility and normative containment is further demonstrated by the products of the Pemberley online 'shoppe'. Notable amongst the site's range of clothing and tote bags featuring Austen quotations is a T-shirt

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emblazoned ‘Feminine lawlessness’, its uncited source an exchange between Edmund Bertram and Mary Crawford in *Mansfield Park*’s pivotal Sotherton scene.¹⁰⁰ Exemplifying the novel’s distinctive conjunction of narrative realism and fairy-tale symbolism, the visit to the Rushworth estate emblematises the actual and potential sexual transgressions that trouble the household community of Mansfield Park; Maria and Henry’s passage through the barred and spiked gates of the Rushworth estate anticipates their adulterous coupling, while the ‘very serpentine course’ taken by the triangulated Fanny, Edmund and Mary symbolises Edmund’s forgetfulness of Fanny and her resolute morality in contrast to Mary’s cosmopolitan allure. The quote that appears on the *Pemberley* T-shirt is taken from Mary’s enquiry to Edmund:

‘I am really not tired, which I almost wonder at; for we must have walked at least a mile in this wood. Do not you think we have?’ ‘Not half a mile,’ was his sturdy answer; for he was not yet so much in love as to measure distance, or reckon time, with feminine lawlessness.¹⁰¹

In citing this arch observation, couched in the ambivalent guise of Austen’s free indirect discourse, the T-shirt gestures towards identifying Austen with the commercialised sex-positivity of third-wave feminism, in which Mary Crawford, characterised by a social mobility and worldliness that allows her to archly reference naval sodomy, seems a more likely contemporary icon than the pious ‘creepmouse’ Fanny Price.¹⁰² The tension between this evocation of gendered transgression and its playful sartorial medium might be seen to be quintessentially camp, as might the conflict between its apparent iconoclasm and the social capital required to appreciate fully its highly literary humour. Moe Meyer defines camp as the queering of mainstream style, his grounding of camp in a performative model of subjectivity foregrounding its relationship to the deconstruction of sexual identity enacted by the concept of queer.¹⁰³ Meyer’s polemical claim that *all* camp is queer might be here endorsed by the appropriation of Austen, figured as exhaustively embodied by the conservative courtship narratives of England’s landed green core, as a signifier of feminist rebellion.¹⁰⁴ The potential queerness of this sartorial offering is nevertheless juxtaposed against the emphatic normativity of T-shirts declaring their wearers’ aspirations to be ‘Mrs Darcy’ or ‘Mrs Tilney’ (in addition to the boast ‘I married my Mr Darcy’), as they are by ‘Elizabeth’ and ‘Darcy’ T-shirts and notebooks, the

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fictional personae of which are represented by faux-Regency silhouettes of the properly desiring (and desirable) Colin Firth and Jennifer Ehle.¹⁰⁵ Just as the theoretical inclusivity of the eighteenth-century public sphere was limited by the convergence of class and gender interests that constituted Bluestocking feminism, as it was by the Blues's publicly staged commitment to heterosociability, the putative universality of *Pemberley*'s online environment is limited by the site's reproduction of the normative alignment of gender and sexuality, the trajectories of its citizens' desires policed as is their membership in its body politic.

Just as the concept of virtual community offers a digital frame through which to analyse the class-constrained limitations of the Bluestocking public sphere, the sociable limits inherent to the Bluestocking public sphere elucidate the operation of the online community of *The Republic of Pemberley*. While not articulated as crudely as Montagu's disdain of Yearsley's effrontery, *The Republic*'s conception of its proper boundaries remains as strictly delimited as the theoretically universal Republic of Letters. In insisting on the strict correspondence between real and virtual identities, *The Republic of Pemberley* resists the performative model of subjectivity that is conceptually foregrounded by the textually-instantiated identities of cyberspace. In so doing, it rejects the possibilities for social transformation promised by the same technology it utilises, employing the online environment to facilitate, rather than transform, the bases of interpersonal exchange. It further resists the queer resonances of its notably camp rhetoric, reinstalling the heterosexual courtship plot as the proper model of Austenian narrative and reader identification. Just as the eighteenth-century Bluestockings resisted the levelling implications of the doctrine of rational conversation and obfuscated the queer commitments manifest within their personal narratives, *The Republic of Pemberley* resists the unbounded possibilities of a community constructed around the most expansive understandings of Austen's *oeuvre*. Both forms of virtual community thus reproduce the sociable strictures they ostensibly suspend, underscoring the ongoing importance of attending to the operations of power within even the most apparently inclusive of social formations.

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